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"Erotiques Cannibales": A queer ontological take on desire from urban Congo

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Abstract – This article illustrates the theoretical productivity of the recent ontological turn in anthropology as a way to further "anthropologize" queer studies by taking seriously erotic alterity as an ethnographic situation that unlocks possibilities for radically re-thinking desire beyond the limiting framework of "sexuality". It proposes a thought experiment with the specific ways in which same-sex loving men and boys in contemporary urban Congo conceptualize desire as a self-affirming predatory force that joyfully queers the "normal" world. Rather than ethnographically representing "their" erotic concepts, this article tries to think *through* them and calls for a non-melancholic theory of desire.

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…only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all.

Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power: 195-196

"Anthropologizing" queer studies

Queer theory and queer studies – so it is loudly proclaimed or softly whispered within anthropology departments – have somehow "lost connection" with the "real world out there". While "sexuality" is a valid research topic for many anthropologists today, explicit references to queer theory are still often met with suspicious goggling or – perhaps worse – by a contrived liberal understanding that queer anthropologists have to be forgiven for their theoretical "orientation". Even within the anthropology of gender and sexuality, one often hears the ambition to bring Queer Theory *down to earth* through ethnographic empiricism – i.e. to "ground" its theory – as if queer studies needed to be rescued by anthropology's ground forces. Such ethnographic rescue operations would not only chain rampant queer theorization but also correct its supposedly inherent ethnocentrism.

As anthropologists, we indeed often try to diversify, transnationalize or even "colour" queer studies within a broader academic division of labour in a globalizing world where, unfortunately, many out-of-the-way realities would remain invisible if it weren't for the sweat and tears of our fieldwork. In many ways, such necessary injections of lived cultural complexity decentre the unquestionably stubborn ethnocentric tendencies within queer theory. But my concern is that these so-called diversifying moves only lead to ultimately sterile claims of exception based on the particularities of each individual "case". Moreover, anthropology's methodological fieldwork fetishism and allegiance to grounded theory risk becoming easy excuses for a disturbingly widespread theory-aversion. To avoid these traps of false modesty and ethnographic parochialism, Tom Boellstorff argues that "[a]nthropology's greatest potential contribution to queer studies is not to ethnographize or transnationalize it, but to anthropologize it" (2007a: 2). And a very promising way for *anthropologization*, I would add, is to continuously (re)connect queer theory to what has always been its major driving force: alterity.

Alterity is, however, a notoriously problematic notion within anthropology. It immediately summons the haunting orientalist ghost of *exoticism* we have spent the last decades putting to rest. Precisely because of its manifest colonial origins, anthropology has tried very hard to figure out how to deal with its epistemological complicities and how to keep the sirens of exoticization at bay. So-called "othering" thereby became an accusation vented against colleagues who had apparently missed the "reflexive" turn of the *Writing Culture* years (Clifford and Marcus 1986). By claiming "alterity" as the central focus of anthropology, I am not, therefore, arguing for an uncritical return to an essentializing "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991). Neither am I narrowing down the broad perspective of our discipline to an exclusive concern with difference. My focus on alterity is a deliberately political and tactical move: a conceptual Trojan horse to "anthropologize" queer studies.

As an *ontological* relation in everyday situations that are not "making sense", alterity not only arises in faraway places but also constantly emerges all around us as a permanent possibility of human interaction. Anthropology is the *critical practice* of allowing alterity to destabilize the taken-for-granted nature of reality and fully develop its radical theoretical power. As Ghassan Hage (2012: 289-290) put it, anthropology "constantly exposes us to the possibility of being other than what we are [and] invites us to become aware of […] social forces and potentials that are lying dormant in our midst." As a critically comparative exercise that foregrounds the permanent *possibility of being other*, anthropology welcomes alterity as a site for radical thinking. Henceforth, its most valuable contribution to queer theory is not a habitual retreat into empiricism but a firm recognition of its autonomous theoretical force. In order to transcend what Boellstorff (2007b: 19) calls the mere "ethnocartography" of non-normative sexual subject positions, queer anthropology needs to fully acknowledge the possibilities of finding "theory" where we find our "data" – i.e. *out there* in everyday experiences and understandings – and use the latter as sites for radical conceptual transformation.

Within the field of sexuality studies, anthropology illustrates the profound limitations of "sexuality" as an analytical frame to understand lived erotic realities in many non-Western contexts. But although queer anthropology is clearly conceptually productive[1], we often tend to limit our theorizing to another round of investigating the relationships between "gender" and "sexuality" and thus remain prisoners of terms *set for us* by queer theory and sexuality studies, rather than open up to the radical conceptual possibilities of ethnographic fieldwork that generate fresh theorizations *from* the South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). In the following paragraphs, I argue that by taking alterity seriously (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 489), queer anthropology becomes a true motor for theoretical innovation rather than a mere importer of queer concepts. The contested old idea of alterity might thereby produce new "coincidences" between anthropology and queer studies (Boellstorff 2007a), which both have always been at their very

best whenever they allowed themselves the necessary luxury of "savage" thinking (Lévi-Strauss 1962).

Queering the ontological turn

The urgent political call for savage theoretical thinking sparked by ethnographic encounters with alterity is now often associated with what, over the last years, has become known as the "ontological turn". But although widely discussed (*and* contested) within anthropology departments, the ontology debates have remained largely absent from queer anthropology. The apparent essentialist connotations of "ontology" are indeed fundamentally at odds with the latter's social constructivist orthodoxy. Nevertheless, in many respects, anthropology's ontological turn is more a radical twist of its 1980s epistemological critique than a re-turn to cultural essentialism. In this article, I therefore explore the potential of this new ontological fire and its radical investment in alterity to further "anthropologize" queer studies (thereby simultaneously revealing the unexpected queerness of the ontological turn itself).

Within anthropology, the so-called ontological turn mainly comprises work by French anthropologists Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour, Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and several others, such as Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen and Eduardo Kohn. Because a detailed discussion of the ontological turn and its many critiques and counter-critiques falls outside the scope of this article[2], the following paragraphs only summarize its most programmatic strand, as it is mainly developed by Viveiros de Castro (to whose 2009 book *Métaphysiques Cannibales* this article pays queer tribute).

Starting from the Deleuzian premise that "the Other is the expression of a possible world" (2002: 479), Viveiros de Castro calls for anthropological *thought experiments*, "as a manner of experiencing

for oneself […] the possible world that [native] concepts project" (484). His fundamental point is not that "natives" think differently from "us" but that they "think exactly 'like us' [a world] very different from ours" (485). Hence, in contrast to predominant culturalist thinking in anthropology, whereby every "culture" has a different "view" on the world (no matter how contested, internally unstable and dynamic), Viveiros de Castro trades the epistemological notion of different world*views* for a radical ontological openness to different *worlds*. He asks for taking "native" thought seriously by "drawing out its consequences, and verifying the effects that it can produce on our own thinking" (489). Instead of merely "describing" or "representing" native thought in our own terms, we should let alien concepts "deform and subvert" our conceptualizations (2004: 4), thereby multiplying the world as a "permanent decolonization of thought" (2009: 4).

For queer scholars, this turn from epistemology (its characteristic problem of *representation* and its deceptively easy fix of "culture") towards ontology (and its politics of *translation* between different "worlds") might seem counterintuitive. Given queer suspicions about the anthropological insistence on difference (e.g. Hoad 2000) and the pitfalls of reifying cultural sexual/gendered categories in HIV prevention and LGBT activism (e.g. Boyce 2007), *ontologizing* difference indeed seems to amplify rather than circumvent the problems of cultural reification. However, for most ontological anthropologists, ontologies are not reified entities existing "out there" in actual human living groups but rather models (Descola 2014) or heuristic devices "postulated by the anthropologists for analytical purposes" (Holbraad in Carrithers et al 2010: 185). In other words, ontology – in contrast to culture – does not "belong" to the people we study (ibid).

Despite initial appearances, this fundamental anti-representationalism is a very queer political stance. Instead of "representing" native thought, ontological approaches *indefinitely sustain* the manifold possibilities of its "as yet unsuspected virtualities" (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 490).

Sharing queer theory's world-making aspirations and its welcoming attitude and vulnerability to the "strangeness of others" (O'Rourke 2011:115), ontological anthropology is thus "radically anticipatory" (Berlant & Warner 1995: 344). Moreover, despite justified reservations about uncritical "othering", alterity actually *is* queerness: a "crashing wave of potentiality" (Muñoz 2009:185) through which we experience unexpected possibilities and realize that "we can be radically other than what we are" (Hage 2012:289). "Anthropologizing" queer studies through the ontological turn thus merely reconnects queer theory to alterity and its inherent potential for subversive thinking that sometimes suffocates under the weight of a queer canon.

At the same time, however, such an ontological take on queer studies also explicitly "queers" the ontological turn. It constantly reveals the internal instabilities, ambiguities and enabling exclusions of native thought and allows them to fully operate within and distort the otherwise homogeneous ontologies it heuristically produces. Queer fieldwork participants indeed constantly unmask "general" anthropological models as unwittingly heterosexist products. They insistently question the "ownership" of native concepts, expropriating them for their own thought experiments and pointing at their unsuspected queer virtualities. As the following paragraphs show, queer ontological anthropology does not reveal a queer "point of view" on the world but radically opens up to the possibility of a *different* world as another actualization of the manifold possibilities of the Real.

This article's thought experiment thus simply extends my interlocutors' own queering reconceptualizations of so-called "normal" ideas, unveiling the unspoken homoerotic dynamics at the centre of contemporary urban Congolese thinking. By profoundly engaging with the ways my informants and participants theorize desire – i.e. what I will call, for lack of a better world, "their" *erotology* – I propose a conceptual experiment to think through the logical consequences of

this queer codification of desire and, thereby, *un*-think the concept of "sexuality" that continues to haunt queer studies.

Ethnographic background

Although the aim of this article is thus theoretical rather than descriptive – inasmuch as anthropologizing queer studies entails *more* than merely providing an umpteenth ethnographic case study – some basic facts from my on-going fieldwork in the Congolese cities of Kinshasa and Kisangani are needed to fully grasp the significance of the following conceptual exercise[3].

In comparison to neighbouring countries, where mediatized political debates about "homosexuality" have led to intensified "anti-gay" legislation, same-sex sexual acts have never been criminalized in the Democratic Republic of Congo. But while explicit political homophobia remains uncommon, public attitudes about gender non-conformity and sexual deviance are often extremely dismissive and occasionally violent[4]. As in other African contexts, the perceived *growing* visibility of so-called *pédés*[5] is commonly read as a sign of the coming of the Apocalypse (Van Klinken 2013). Understood as the latest urban "fashion" (Reid 2003), male same-sex sexual practices are thereby frequently coded as morally reprehensible *occult* techniques used by ambitious young men to "steal" the power and vitality of their sexual partners.

But while a moralizing public thus avidly discusses the perceived "rise" in "homosexuality", everyday same-sex erotic practices usually retreat behind a wall of silence in face-to-face interactions with family, friends and neighbours. This generalized silence, however, allows for an unspoken practical freedom to engage in *hidden* same-sex erotic behaviour, as long as it does not interfere with one's heterosexual marriage and social responsibility of procreation[6]. Moreover, despite popular homophobic discourses, Congolese cities also offer many possibilities for

surprisingly *visible* expressions of erotic dissidence. For instance, outside (and out-of-sight) of church and family, the paradigmatic urban space of the bar (Lingala: *nganda*) often allows for public performances of gender and sexual transgression. The fascination for transgression is a fundamental though rarely acknowledged aspect of Congo's popular ideology of *ambiance* (Biaya 1996). As a self-proclaimed libertarianism, this *ambiance* – which, depending on one's moral discourse and audience, constitutes either the nation's pride or shame – indeed provides a fertile ground for public manifestations of queer desire.

This unsaid homoerotic potential of *ambiance* illustrates the broader significance of male same-sex desire in Congolese urban realities. Rather than being a marginal or minority phenomenon, male homoerotic desire indeed seems to play a central role for hegemonic Congolese masculinities. My queer interlocutors, for instance, boldly capture this unsaid general homoeroticism when they make the frequent claim that "*all* Congolese men are *gay*". Instead of dismissing such recurrent statements as erroneous or mere wishful thinking, an ontological approach that takes "native" thought seriously forces one into a radically different direction. As this article makes clear, such statements are fundamental to a queer theorization of desire, preying on the always already *homo*erotic affordances of "normal" city life.

At the interface between this so-called "normal" and queer world, a characteristically dualist homoerotic economy arises that codes its internal vectors of desire according to a gendered logic of penetration (Hendriks forthcoming). It thereby introduces a vernacular *actif/passif* distinction according to the position one supposedly occupies during anal intercourse. But whereas the receptive "passive" partners in same-sex relationships generally identify as *fioto* (a relatively recent term indicating their self-consciously *effeminate masculinity*), their "active" boyfriends do not define themselves (nor are they defined by others) as fundamentally different from other men: they just happen to like sex with men and boys (usually alongside erotic relationships with women and

girls). As in other contemporary African realities (e.g. Gaudio 2009; Reid 2013), this gendered axis of penetration thus reproduces a male/female binary that somehow "heterosexualizes" same-sex desire. But the same binary logic of penetration also evokes its own classification error as soon as it confronts the empirical existence of men who occupy *both* active and passive erotic positions. As we will see below, the efforts to conceptualize this internal problem of "sexual versatility" – rather than the hetero/homo syntax error of "bisexuality" – informs and unsettles my interlocutors' queer theorizations of desire.

Confronting erotic alterity

An ontological take on queer anthropology requires us to "take alterity seriously" *ontologically* instead of reducing its theoretical potential by framing it as a merely cultural or representational divergence of views. To give a first illustration of such an approach, I briefly deal with three statements I regularly encountered during fieldwork in Kinshasa and Kisangani and show how the "ontological conflicts" (Blaser 2013) they formulate call for theoretical reconceptualization.

Statement A is the often-heard claim by religious and state authorities that "there are no homosexuals in Africa" (often accompanied by the claim that "homosexuality is un-African"). This statement radically contradicts with LGBT activists' and queer scholars' counter-claim B that "there are, and have always been, homosexuals in Africa" but also with the abovementioned assertion C by my *fioto* interlocutors that simply "all [African] men are *gay*". While these three statements seem to be as many representations of (or beliefs about) the same reality – i.e. the existence of "homosexuality" – they are actually speaking alongside each other about three very different realities.

The difference between the first two claims is often cast as a difference between sexual *identities* and erotic *practices*. A is thereby understood as a statement about the absence of overt LGBT "identities", while B is a statement about the occurrence of same-sex "practices". Such a practice/identity distinction is not, however, unambiguous: A can always be reformulated as a moral denial about the occurrence of sodomy in "Africa", while B also comprises statements about the traditional presence of "cultural" categories and identities for sexually dissident and gender-nonconforming individuals. Moreover, while this practice/identity distinction is based on the same representation/reality divide that is fundamentally questioned by the ontological turn (whereby identities are "cultural" constructions through which the reality of sexual practices is "represented"), it is not well suited to deal with the ontological conflict formulated by the third statement. Indeed, while C can always be understood as a *fioto* claim about the omnipresence of practices cast *in the language of* (Western, globalizing) identities, it actually contains a much deeper challenge.

From an anthropological perspective, the statement that "all men are gay" (while we clearly know that they are *not*) poses an epistemological challenge of the same conceptual order as the Azande claims about witches that led Evans-Pritchard to begin his famous book on witchcraft by comforting the reader that "witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist" (1937: 63). An ontological approach, however, deliberately avoids such a clash of "beliefs", which, in the end, inevitably forces the anthropologist to take sides. Instead of framing C as a *fioto* representation of the same reality we are trying to investigate – i.e. the occurrence of something conceptualized as "homosexuality" – it understands C as an answer to a fundamentally *different* question. As a world-making claim rather than a representational one, "all men are gay" does not try to answer the question of the actual presence of "gay" or "homosexual" men but tries to conceptualize desire so as to account for the inherently queer possibilities of the supposedly "normal" world. Once we understand this claim as a *fioto* conceptualization of desire – of the same order as my

own conceptualizations – we might find ways to rethink the erotic beyond the straightjacket of "sexuality" as its cultural representation.

Re-conceptualizing desire

The initially nonsensical statement that "all men are gay" thus articulates an ontological conflict with orthodox Western understandings of "sexuality". Together with other discursive utterances and bodily practices to which I turn below, it tentatively refers to an implicit *theory* of desire or what one might call a *fioto* "erotology". Two preliminary remarks are, however, in order.

First, this so-called "erotology" is not an actually existing sexual ontology "out there" shared by all my interlocutors but rather the *outcome* of an ethnographic encounter that simultaneously produces "my" and "their" erotic theories. While, for reasons of textual articulation, it might appear as a pre-existing entity, this erotology is actually an *a posteriori* projection in a Wagnerian ethnographic exercise of mutual misunderstanding that produces "their" ontology as much as it reconceptualises mine (Wagner 1975). Second, for the same reason, the following thought experiment does not pretend to ethnographically represent or speak on behalf of my participants and informants. I do not describe "how they think" but rather try to "learn to think, given what they say and do" (Holbraad 2009: 91) – and thereby produce a model that enables me to write about "them" for "us".

In the following paragraphs I work towards an ontological rethinking of desire in two complementary moves. First, I try to conceptualize the logical consequences of the specific way in which my interlocutors solve the aforementioned "problem" of sexual versatility by a double activation of a libidinal potential present in every body. Second, I present some first steps to

reconnect this *fioto* erotology to a broader "normal" theorization of desire as an essentially "cannibalistic" force.

Activating desire

The empirical existence of sexual versatility leads to a classification error within the *actif/passif* matrix through which both *fioto* men and their "normal" boyfriends normally understand and produce their affects of erotic belonging. In Kinshasa and Kisangani, my interlocutors regularly talk about such men and boys, who alternatingly play "passive" and "active" roles, as if they "have a double SIM card" (*baza na double SIM*). They thereby creatively refer to the omnipresent dual SIM[7] technology that enables one to capture two telephone networks at the same time. The aptness of the expression is striking. Although double SIM cell phones are a considerable advantage in Congolese cities where telephone networks are notoriously unstable, such phones are usually considered to be low-quality counterfeit Chinese devices. In the same way, people with a double SIM card, who occupy a hybrid position in the binary logic of penetration, are commonly conceived as unreliable (*hypocrite*) or phony (*piraté*) persons who pretend to be "real" men but secretly desire to be penetrated by them.

The idea of sexual versatility as double SIM card possession contains an inherent conceptualization of desire-as-connection that equally informs other statements made by my interlocutors. For instance, *fioto* men and their "normal" boyfriends regularly express their belonging to what they call *monde oyo* ("this world [of men who have sex with men]") through a literal "I am connected" (*naza branché*). Like double SIM card accusations, *naza branché* statements thus conceptualize persons as capturing devices searching for and connecting to one or more "networks"[8]. More particularly, they betray a conceptualization in which specific SIM cards give a gendered orientation to the connective force of desire. Although never stated as such by my

interlocutors, one might indeed infer that, if sexual versatility is conceived as double SIM card possession, exclusively "active" or "passive" individuals must therefore be endowed with only one. SIM cards henceforth come in two versions: one that enables "passive" desires (in *fioto* men and most women and girls) and another one that enables "active" desires (in "normal" men but also some women and girls) – and *not*, significantly, one for cross-sex desire and another one for same-sex desire.

At the same time, however, their own logic suggests that each SIM card does not actually produce a different "kind" of desire. They merely actualize – or, better, canalize – one and the same libidinal force in two opposite directions. Indeed, inasmuch as SIM cards are understood as enabling software applications inserted into the same hardware, desire itself is conceived as a hard-wired bodily potential that can be *coded* in two gendered ways: an "active" SIM card that actualizes a masculine potential of the body and a "passive" SIM card that actualizes a feminine potential of the same body. While these SIM cards thus clearly orient desire, they are not "sexual orientations" (if anything, they canalize desire through a binary code of "gender" rather than "sexuality").

Moreover, the same logic of SIM cards suggests that these software applications are not necessarily definite or irrevocable. Indeed, although many *fioto* men and boys often claim to be "born like this" (*je suis né comme ça*) in order to avoid attempts to "cure" them (*kobikisa*), stories about changing SIM cards abound. It is, for instance, assumed that men often acquire *fioto* desires over time, having their first experiences of anal penetration by force (*par force*) or out of curiosity (*komeka*, "to taste") and then gradually become "addicted" (*ils prennent goût*). Men and boys are also often supposedly "initiated" (*kobatisama*) into same-sex practices as passive partners of (usually older) men, only to "promote" (*promouvoir*) to a "normal" position later on. But while such stories indicate the theoretical possibility of changing or adding SIM cards, they equally

demonstrate that acquiring active or passive desires is not as simple as that. A full activation of SIM cards requires a period of habituation that, when completed, makes them more permanent applications than their theoretical changeability would suggest[9].

Cannibal erotics

Taking seriously as a *worlding* claim my interlocutors' conceptualization of sexual versatility as suspicious double SIM card belonging thus brings us to an "erotology" in which desire is theorized as the same hard-wired libidinal potential that can be activated in two different but non-exclusive ways. This *inclusive* disjunction of desire profoundly contradicts the mainstream Western *exclusive* disjunction of sexual orientation as a fixed same-sex or cross-sex erotic attraction (Deleuze & Guattari 1972). The model of desire presented above is, then, the product of the ontological conflict arising between both conceptualizations of desire, inasmuch as they mutually presuppose one another during fieldwork[10]. Ethnography nevertheless forces me to further rethink the notion of desire because the above-presented erotology is actually nothing but a queer take on a much broader conceptualization of desire that is firmly embedded in contemporary Congolese urban imaginaries.

This broader conceptualization of desire emerges, for instance, in the semiotics of *mposa*[11], the common Lingala term for "desire" (but also for "greed", "ambition" and "thirst"). Used after the verb *koyoka* (to feel), *mposa* can refer to a specific object – e.g. *nazo yoka mposa ya masanga* (I am thirsty for beer) or *mposa ya mbongo* (thirsty for money) – or to a desired act or activity – e.g. *nazo yoka mposa ya kosuba* (I feel like urinating) or *mposa ya kosiba* (having sex). As these examples illustrate, *mposa* thus refers to a bodily urge to either obtain or get rid of something. Hence, by analogy, male sexual desire can be conceptualized as either a need to release an internal flow or as a bodily thirst to absorb an external substance. In this latter sense, sexual desire is also frequently

expressed through the verb *kolia* or "to eat" – e.g. *nakolia yo* (I am going to eat you)[12]. It thereby explicitly mobilizes a widespread eating register used for describing relationships in which one term is said to grow *at the expense of* the other (see also Hendriks 2013). Eating denotes, for instance, the hierarchical flow of consumption between a "chef" (*mokonzi*) and his dependents or the predatory relations between a "witch" (*ndoki*) and his or her victims.

Such *trophic* relations thus generally reflect a zero-sum theorization of power: every increase in power is necessarily a consumption of power elsewhere. In the case of sexual relationships, however, such consumption usually works simultaneously in both directions, although actual imbalances and suspicions about "exploitation" are common. In *cross*-sex relationships, men are often said to "eat" their women and girlfriends (not just sexually but also, indirectly, through the products of their labour) while simultaneously "feeding" them (as providing husbands and lovers, but also as ejaculatory energy-givers). At the same time, however, cross-sex relationships always contain an imaginary threat to male autonomy because of the supposedly "devouring" power of female erotic desire as soon as it erupts from its abject sphere of "non-existence" to which it was symbolically expelled by phallocratic ideology.

In *same*-sex relationships, this general trophic nature of sex is even more explicitly emphasized because of the popular associations between same-sex practices and the occult. While cross-sex relationships are always at least potentially exploitative, same-sex relationships are supposed to be so by default. Although most of my interlocutors often strongly object to this popular framing of homoerotic relationships, many of them admit that same-sex occult practices are frequent. For instance, stories about men who "steal the star" of their partner (*azo yiba étoile na ye*) account for the widespread fears of having sex with strangers because of the risk of having one' luck (*chance*) or force (*force*) unknowingly tapped. The dominant directionality of this sexual consumption is, however, quite ambivalent. Although the predominant flux of money and gifts usually goes from

fioto men to their "normal" boyfriends because the latter are seen as net providers of pleasure for their *fioto* partners and thus need to be materially "compensated"[13], matters are less neat on an invisible level where it is never entirely clear who is benefiting from whom[14]. While *fioto* men and boys are – because of their gendered erotic dissidence – regularly taken to be *witches* eating their partners' life force, "normal" men who have sex with men are often thought to be occultists (*occultistes*) stealing their partners' star.

This gendered version of a classical witchcraft/magic distinction (Evans-Pritchard 1937), however, ultimately refers to the same occult eating system in which desire shows its cannibalistic face. Such a conceptualization of desire should be understood in a non-metaphorical way: it is not just that sex is *like* eating; sex *is* eating (inasmuch as eating is always somewhat sexual). Fieldwork thus suggests that erotic desire in male same-sex relations is not essentially different from desire in cross-sex relations. "In the end, we are all cannibals!", one of my *fioto* participants once provocatively stated. In both cases, desire is implicitly coded as the same hard-wired bodily predatory force that drives both sex and power. Henceforth, inasmuch as such a codification of desire can be understood as *a* "sexuality", same-sex and cross-sex desire would share the *same* sexuality rather than being expressions of different sexualities. Although one might object that such a model of desire deprives sex from its altruistic aspects of love, trust and intimate friendship, it must be noted that the desire to build the self by eating the other is also simultaneously a vulnerable desire for relatedness: occult accumulation is merely the dark side of intimacy.

It should be clear by now that the conceptualization of desire presented above profoundly contradicts with most Western models of desire. Indeed, both in Western vernacular understandings and in psychoanalytical theories, desire is usually conceived as a *lack*, whereby the object of desire is essentially an object we have lost (and will never find back). The erotology

sketched above, on the other hand, conceptualizes desire as an intrinsically self-preserving and predatory outward-going force. Desire is thus not melancholically oriented to a lost object (Butler 1997: 132-150) but focused on the incorporation of life forces in order to reproduce itself and thereby build and reinforce the individual subject in a competitive environment.

Such an ethnographic re-theorization of desire obviously resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire-as-*production* in opposition to the Oedipal desire-as-lack[15]. The above-mentioned erotology is, however, *not* a Deleuzian theorization of desire as an un-coded pre-social polymorphous flux but itself already a social *codification* of desire as a devouring urge. It is the first step in what Renaat Devisch has called the "domestication of desire", whereby desire is its own *a posteriori* projection as an *a priori* anti-social force in need of domestication by kinship (Devisch & Brodeur 1999). Just as Devisch posits the Yaka sorcerer in southwestern Congo as a figure of wild insatiable and incestuous lust that *needs* to be imagined as a counter-image of society, male same-sex desire – which is also conceived as infertile and, thus, as a selfish and socially unproductive expense of energy – is first imagined as anti-social before it can be socialized through marriage and kinship.

At the same time, however, both sorcerous lust and homoerotic desire always unveil the nature of *all* desire as a self-affirming predatory life force beyond the reproductory logic of kinship: a multiplication without procreation, as Guy Hocquenghem (1972: 113, 116) emphasizes in his proto-queer elaboration on Deleuze. It is exactly this pleasure-seeking and life-affirming (*a*moral rather than *im*moral) nature of desire, so poignantly illustrated by the dynamics of homoeroticism, that accounts for the unspoken but central role of same-sex desire in Congolese urban ideologies of *ambiance* and its semi-public space of the *nganda* as a momentary hiding place from the social commands of kinship.

Anti-melancholia

Ethnographic fieldwork among *fioto* men and their "normal" boyfriends in urban Congo thus produces a relation of erotic alterity, which unlocks possibilities for thought experiments that ultimately lead to the projection of an "erotology" – not as a sexual culture out there but as a non-representative model for thinking otherwise. This article's ethnographic re-conceptualization of desire thereby illustrates the productivity of the so-called ontological turn for further "anthropologizing" queer studies. By taking erotic alterity seriously (again), it reveals the autonomous theoretical potential of anthropology as more than a set of ethnographic counterexamples and reconnects to the fundamental role of alterity within queer theory itself.

The "cannibal" erotics sketched above suggest a savage re-thinking of the erotic assumptions of queer theory and illustrate how anthropology can work towards a permanent decolonization of "sexuality" thinking. Indeed, as Philippe Descola has argued for notions such as class, race, or gender, "sexuality" is a "patiently constructed grid [that] will have to be, if not wholly discarded – for it expresses a specific anthropology which deserves to be taken into account alongside others – at least demoted from its imperial position" (2014: 279). By showing the possibilities of "other" worlds as virtual presences, ontological anthropology rallies behind queer politics as "an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to *open up the possibility of different modes of living*" (Butler 2004:4; my emphasis). This article's ethnographic thought experiment specifically calls for a fundamental re-thinking of erotics *beyond* the framework of sexuality and a *non*-melancholic theorization of gender in a world that is, nevertheless, anxiously phallocentric – a theoretical task that still lies ahead of us.

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Tom Boellstorff's (2005) "archipelagic" conceptualization of erotic belonging or his "dubbing" theory of the transnationalization of erotic identities as examples of how to use one's data as concepts to experimentally rethink issues from the broader field of sexuality studies.

[2] See, for instance, Carrithers et al. (2010), Alberti et al. (2011), Pedersen (2012), Laidlaw & Heywood (2013), Scott (2013) and Holbraad & Pedersen (2014).

[3] This postdoctoral research project on male same-sex desire in urban DR Congo is funded by the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO).

[4] Sexually dissident men and boys in Kinshasa sometimes encounter police harassment or abuse but rarely face physical aggression by other urban inhabitants.

[5] The popular French term *pédé* often specifically refers to supposedly "passive homosexuals".

[6] Because of the social stigma attached to same-sex practices – particularly when one plays a "receptive" role – one quickly acquires the necessary skills to know when to keep quiet (*kozinda*; literally "to submerge") and when to "let oneself go" (*kolembisa*; "to relax").

[7] Subscriber Identification Module

[8] Note that the technological language of "capturing" invisible networks is also frequently used to denote the hidden connective capacities of witches who are supposed to have occult access to the "second world" (*deuxième monde*) of witchcraft.

[9] This relative permanence of SIM cards is also an effect of the power of erotic identification. Because each "network" consists of people with the same SIM card, who are, therefore, *similar* inasmuch as they desire people from the other network, connecting to a network implies an identification on the basis of a shared gendered directionality of desire. In other words, the "network" is an intra-community network of erotic belonging rather than an inter-community network for dating potential partners.

[10] A full exploration of the intimate ways in which my ethnographic confrontation with erotic alterity has affected my own self-understanding as a sexual being and a "gay" man, and how this

experiential libidinal process in turn affected the more reflective (but equally libidinal) exercise of reconceptualization falls, although absolutely necessary, outside the scope of this article.

[11] *Boluli* (adoration) or *bolingo* (love) have a more specific (and perhaps romantic) meaning than the wide-ranging *mposa*.

[12] Note, however, that a desire to eat is not indicated by the word *mposa* but by a different term (*nzala*, "hunger").

[13] It is indeed striking how, in comparison to cross-sex relationships, the "transactionality" of sex in same-sex relationships is reversed. This is often accounted for by the fact that *fioto* men and boys need to "convince" their objects of desire (who are, at least ideally, always non-responsive "normal" men). In other cases, this reversed transactionality is an explicit compensation for the useless *dépense* of sperm in barren and un(re)productive relationships.

[14] "Normal" men, however, often consider themselves to be possible victims of *fioto* desire, which is, even more so than female desire, always supposed to be inherently "out of control".

[15] Given Deleuze and Guattari's overt reliance on Africanist anthropology as a major source of inspiration this resonance should not come as a complete surprise.

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